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AN ANALYSIS OF THE IDEA OF OBLIGATION.

IN looking over the current Utilitarian ethical systems, many persons, not otherwise disinclined to accept a theory of this nature, must have been struck by the unsatisfactory treatment uniformly accorded to the idea of obligation. The fundamental moral force being placed in Altruism, or the love of our fellow-men, there seems to be nothing to do with the "ought," but to explain it as a relic of our training as children when we were subject to the authority of parents and teachers, or as the result of the handing down of certain customs, from generation to generation, till their observation has finally come to be a matter of instinct. Sometimes, indeed, the inadequacy of their theories, notwithstanding the element of truth they undoubtedly contain, is perceived in connection with some striking fact of the moral life, but in such a case we are bidden to note how an ideal may command. The face or landscape floating before the imagination of the painter allows him no rest till it is transferred to the canvas as perfectly as he is capable of doing it, and similarly a social ideal may fairly drive us on to do more and still more to make human life richer and better. This certainly is a step in the right direction, and yet even such a position as this seems still open to the most serious objections. For while it may doubtless be true that the perfect altruist recognizes in the words "the greatest possible happiness of the greatest number," a formula representing the sum of all he is striving for and longing to see attained, on the other hand the absolute egoist finds all *his* desire contained within the limits of his own personal happiness. Do we then make these two statements with the same indifference with which we might say, this little girl likes to play with her dolls, while her brother will have nothing to do with such a form of amusement, but spends his spare time at base-ball? By no means, for in the former case we approve of the likes and dislikes of the one and disapprove of those of the other, and say such

and such *ought* to be this man's ideal, whether it really be or not. So that above and beyond all our accidental likes and dislikes, we feel there are certain things we ought to like, or at any rate certain things we ought to do. A comprehensive ethical theory is accordingly bound to give some account of the characteristic idea involved in such a statement, and to explain why we say, for instance, that a man ought to be benevolent, failing in which task it has confessed its impotence before one of the fundamental facts of the moral consciousness.

It is here that the intuitionist school comes forward with an explanation of its own. It claims the idea of obligation is unanalyzable and unique, and is given us directly through the reason, the faculty of intuitive cognition. By means of this we know we *ought* to do this and that, utterly regardless of whether we are conscious of any desire to do it or not, and are accordingly convinced that certain ideals may properly be termed *right*, and others *wrong*. Such a hypothesis has at first sight so much the appearance of plausibility that it might be left to pass unchallenged, did not the introduction of a set of entirely new elements which it involves arouse the suspicion of an offence against the law of parsimony. But this being the case, it becomes necessary to examine it more closely, and try whether it may not be possible to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of all the facts by means of the simple principles which are and must be recognized to a greater or less extent by every school of thought. With this end in view, we will take a typical altruist and endeavor to trace the genesis of the idea of obligation in him.

The fundamental notion with which we have here to do is that of approbation and disapprobation. We begin by observing that the direction of this class of judgments is determined, in the first instance, at any rate by the fitness of things to the accomplishment of the ends that are the objects of desires. Accordingly the supreme ideal of the altruist being what it is, his approbation and disapprobation of particular actions will be distributed according as they are calculated to contribute towards its realization, *and this will be as true of others' actions as of his own*. Whether he ordered beef-steak

or oysters for lunch yesterday he probably does not care, but it cannot be a matter of indifference to him whether he let slip an opportunity to improve his own financial condition, let us say, or that of a friend, to whom a word on his part might have been a great deal of assistance. For precisely this same reason it may be all the same to him whether his neighbor passes his leisure time in reading the newspaper or playing cards, but he does not feel indifferent any longer when the same man spends his evenings squandering the money his family need to supply them with the decencies and the comforts of life; for, with his broad sympathies, the privations and perhaps suffering thus entailed upon a group of dependent beings come home to him as closely as if they were his own. And this principle will hold good wherever he may look in the world. In so far as his desires are directed towards the happiness of his kind, the labors of those who, with him, are busy upon the great work of making man's life richer and better, will be viewed with approbation, while those who are engaged in pulling down the structure which he is helping slowly and painfully to build up cannot but be the objects of an intense feeling of disapprobation.

Where we are possessed with a strong desire for a person to do a particular thing, whatever it be, we do not allow matters to stop with a mere emotion of disapprobation when he fails to respond to our expectations; we appear before him with a demand that the deed be done, or under other circumstances that it be left undone, a demand which owes a large share of the energy with which it is expressed, not so much to the disapprobation pure and simple, as to the resentment against the offender which almost invariably follows in its train. Imperious natures do this upon the most trivial occasions, not only when another appears to be about to interfere with far-reaching plans of their own, but also when he exhibits little disagreeable traits whether in dress or habits. In matters of mere taste, however, the average man will not go so far as to make a formal complaint with a request that the offence cease; what agonies have many of us endured at hotel tables from certain peculiarities in the manners of the individuals oppo-

site us, and all without anything more than an inner protest. But absolutely cruel treatment is almost sure to bring the cry of, halt! from the sufferer, if he possesses the slightest particle of energy in his disposition, and this demand will be echoed by the sympathetic spectator.

We may conceive of a grade of intelligence where every desire to have things act in a given way is immediately followed by a demand upon the person, animal, or thing to act in the manner desired. But with increase of knowledge we soon discover that certain things are possible, and others impossible, and learn to confine our demands within the limits of the former. We no longer command the wind to cease blowing, the lion to drop his prey, the Australian savage to understand Plato. And so, any one conscious of an unwelcome pressure of our will upon him has one way open to him (and but one, besides flight) to free himself from it, and that is to demonstrate the impossibility of a compliance on his part with what we ask of him.* The methods he employs with this end in view may indeed be various, but the underlying principle is always the same. Perhaps his arguments may reduce themselves to one of two forms. He may on the one hand try to show that the desire which finds expression in this particular demand is incompatible with and excludes the realization of some other stronger and more permanent desire which he knows us to cherish; for instance, that indiscriminate charity, although it would doubtless relieve a case of present need, would in the end do the receiver more harm than good; or he appeals to our interest in his happiness, and claims that the sacrifice we ask of him would cost him more than any one else would gain by it; or, taking a different turn, he appeals to our own personal interests and hints that insistence upon our demand will lead to its being made upon us, in due time, in precisely the same form, either by himself or others. On the other hand, the alternative is open to him to attempt to show that the general assumption in regard to

* This intimate relation between the conception of obligation and possibility, is recognized by Kant in his famous dictum, "Du kannst, denn du sollst."

human nature upon which we have based our particular claim is false. He is a member of the *genus homo*, with all its general characteristics, to be sure, but with nothing more; accordingly, as he reminds us, when we appeal to something he does not possess, we are asking impossibilities. Whether the reasoning by which he seeks to establish his major premise is to the point or not, is in the first instance of no significance; provided he believes in them, he will not fail to urge them, and if he succeeds in convincing us we will withdraw the demand. Sometimes he may employ the *argumentum ad hominem*: judging by your conduct, you seem to find no motive within yourself for so doing; why, then, do you expect to find it in me? Or again he appeals to the facts of daily life; no man, he says, ever did such a thing; or if there has been one here and there who did, he must have been quite exceptionally organized, differently from me, at any rate. This is, on the one hand, a favorite mode of reasoning; on the other hand, one that somehow seldom operates to produce conviction. The great argument in his own mind for the impossibility involved in the expectation at the basis of the demand will always be the conviction that what is being asked of him he would never expect of another, while the secret consciousness that, were the places changed, he himself would be making this identical demand, is the only thing that can silence him.

The human race is so constituted that the pressure of one will upon another is capable of exerting no inconsiderable influence. Obedience is, after all, an easy matter, or the absolute monarchy would never have played such a part in history. In the army it may become through drill so natural as to almost appear to partake of the character of reflex action. The weak will never think of resisting, when confronted with a demand made with an air of perfect assurance that it will be followed with instant compliance, and to what length the power of one mind over another can be carried is shown by an incident related by Professor Preyer in his lectures on hypnotism. His two-year-old child was seated at the table, and was in the very act of raising a piece of *Zweibach* to its mouth. The father looked it straight in the

eye, and in a very positive tone said, "You are not hungry." The child was hungry, for he had been without food for a considerable time, but the childish will was not even strong enough to affirm its own feelings in the face of the pressure exerted by the father's words, and, dropping the *Zweibach*, it said, "No, baby not hungry."

But if the impulses within the man, combined with the pressure arising from the fact that he knows you desire and expect a certain action on his part, are not sufficient to produce it, then you have no means left you with which to work upon him, except the promise of a reward or the threat of punishment, legal or social. Then it is that the demand shades almost imperceptibly over into the command.

These facts, it is believed, are capable of explaining all the phenomena of moral obligation. "Ought" involves an affirmation accompanied by an emotion; as the former, it asserts the necessity of a given action as the means to the attainment of a certain end; as the latter, it changes its character within certain limits, according to the relation of the subject, to the end in question, it being possible to thus distinguish four different forms. But the element of constraint is always present, and gives it a distinct individuality throughout.

The first "ought" (in logical order) that appeals to a man is no other than Kant's hypothetical imperative, pure and simple. Take as examples, "I ought to take regular exercise," or, "I ought to take care of my health." As a proposition expressing a truth, the former is equivalent to, "I must . . . if I am to have good health;" the latter, "I must . . . if I am to accomplish the work I have set before me," or, "if I am to possess one of the principal sources of happiness," etc. It is by no means necessary that the desired end should terminate in self; on the contrary, a man who has any regard for the welfare of his child will say, "I ought to give him an education"; a man of patriotism, "I ought to take some part in the political life of my country"; the humanitarian, "I ought to cultivate all my talents and develop all my powers of usefulness." The corresponding emotion in all these cases is a pure feeling of constraint. This is due, on the one hand, to

a certain unwillingness to undergo the required privation or pain (for we do not ordinarily speak of being obliged, except when some form of self-sacrifice is involved); on the other hand, to the more or less clear consciousness of the absolute necessity of the action for the realization of the wished-for end. When the will has been weak and we have failed to do what we ought to have done (in this sense), then we feel disapprobation of self and regret, mingled oftentimes with æsthetic displeasure and disgust.

The second form of the idea of obligation is the simple "You ought." Of this there are two quite distinct varieties. The first is that of mere advice, *e.g.*, "You ought to take regular exercise." This does not necessarily imply any interest for the other person, or a care whether he does it or not. It is simply another way of saying "You must . . . if you are going to have good health," the only difference between the two being that the former rather presupposes the existence of a desire on your part for the benefit to be gained, while the latter confines itself to a pure statement of facts. But the accompanying emotions are of a decidedly different nature where the action in question is viewed primarily as something that is necessary to the satisfaction of some desire or the realization of some end of my own. When I say to a man, "You ought to educate your children," this is indeed only interpretable as, "You must . . . if your children are to be prepared for the highest happiness and usefulness." But if the welfare of this group of dependent beings is an object of personal concern to me, it calls up a far different set of feelings than if I am doing nothing more than directing the attention of the father, in an indifferent sort of way, to the relation between the education of the young and success in life. What is affirmed in the one case with all the coolness with which one might lay down the proposition, $A = A$, now takes on more of the nature of a demand, and the accompanying emotion is the consciousness of a desire to *constrain*, to bring a direct pressure to bear upon the other's will. These same feelings will evidently be present when I say, "You ought to devote yourself to the service of our Fatherland,"

or, "to that of humanity." In case of the failure of the other to respond, we have once more disapprobation and dislike, and in this instance, perhaps, the additional element of resentment.

But the more impersonal forms of obligation are those with which the notion is generally associated, so that they will be recognized as the most familiar. In the case of the "I ought," this appears, when to the feeling of constraint, due to the necessity of the action to the attainment of the desired end, is added the consciousness of the pressure of other wills,—in the last instance, that of the whole community upon my own. The impersonal form of the "You ought" is composed of a similar group of elements. Here I feel that the desire which motives my demand is shared by others, perhaps by all, and that among this number would be the very man himself, if he did not happen to be the one called upon to make the necessary sacrifice. Hence, not only the objectivity of my judgment, but also the feeling of security with which it is put forth, for in the consensus of all I see the proof that nothing impossible has been asked for. Hence, too, in case of a failure to comply, the feeling that it is not so much I as "humanity in me," that has been defied.

It is here that the theological "ought" finds its systematic place. In this case it is the Deity instead of a fellow-man or society in general who expects the action from me, or whose approval and sympathy I know accompany my demand upon some third person. For one who *realizes* the existence of God, the impulses to respond to an expectation coming from such a source are of very great strength. To the tendency, so natural to man, to guide one's actions by what others approve and disapprove, are here added the consciousness of the fruitlessness of all opposition, in view of the omnipotence of the Creator, and the gratitude set flowing at the thought of his love. In bringing one's will to bear upon another, the belief that an omniscient Being echoes our demands gives us a feeling of confidence in the possibility of compliance (as above defined, page 503), such as could scarcely be attained in any other way. All these factors combine to give this form

of the feeling of obligation at first sight an entirely unique character. But it will be found on examination to be made up of just the same elements as may be met with under the various conditions of human society, differing from anything this latter has to show only in degree.

We are now able to explain without difficulty how the æsthetic taste can be a source of the feeling of obligation, a rôle it plays (though usually under another name) in a great number of the intuitionist systems. We have seen that the range of our demands has a tendency to extend itself till it covers the entire field of our personal likes and dislikes, the urgency with which compliance is insisted upon of course diminishing with the intensity of the desire, till it finally dies entirely away. If the thought of drunkenness or promiscuity is disgusting, this will accordingly be ground enough to make me condemn it as wrong, *i.e.*, as something that ought not to be indulged in. If the courage required to face the truth is for me an inspiring sight, I will never allow myself to be disappointed of an expected exhibition without a protest and a lively affirmation of contempt for the cowardice displayed. The same principle holds of the pursuit of culture, the struggle for freedom, and all those traits of character which impress and delight a spectator, and which Martineau and many other intuitionists place in the list of duties. Each of us has an ideal of society more or less distinctly outlined in imagination, which, like the artist, he wishes to behold transferred to the canvas of life. Upon this grand painting every member of the human race is working and must work, either for better or worse, the overwhelming majority confined to some little square; a few, however, engaged in outlining great sections. In proportion to our interest in the work must necessarily grow the imperiousness of our demands that no one spoil the painting, either in plan or execution. And this is just as true where our ideal is an æsthetic one—where what is desired above all else is a state of society that offers an interesting, inspiring, or picturesque spectacle—as where the only condition accepted as satisfactory is one in which the greatest possible happiness of the community is realized.

The broad range of our actual ordinary judgments of approbation and disapprobation is, at first sight at least, one of the most perplexing facts which the utilitarian theory is called upon to explain. There is no doubt that the lists which the intuitionists draw up correspond more nearly to the instinctive judgments of perhaps all of us than the utilitarian is ordinarily willing to admit. The latter quietly selects out of all the various grounds upon which approbation and the contrary are commonly dealt out, a single one, the feeling of altruism, and confines his demands to what this requires. Such an operation is apt to strike one as exceedingly arbitrary, but in reality it is quite the reverse. For it is based upon a clear perception of the limits of the possible (as above defined, pp. 503-4); above all, of the compossible,—to borrow an expression from Leibnitz. For, turn and twist and hide your real meaning behind high-sounding words as you will, the attempt to enforce mere matters of taste is simply calling upon another to make sacrifices in order that you may enjoy the pleasure of seeing them done, a proceeding which is absolutely inconsistent with the true spirit of altruism. Not that the man who has awakened to this truth henceforth becomes a stranger to the impulse to set up indiscriminately his various likes and dislikes as a rule for the action of others; but he controls it, just as he does the impulse of revenge. And it is a fact well worth noting that, after all, as far as his demands are concerned, the æsthetic moralist keeps fairly well within the limits of what is required for the welfare of society. Of course he scorns to justify them by a reference to their relation to the same, but none the less some such relation will usually be found to exist. From which it would appear that even in the temperament which has produced this school of thinkers, a greater or less share of altruism must enter—though, without doubt, unconsciously—to reinforce the taste before the latter feels strong enough to urge its demands in the face of the opposition of a refractory world which knows very well how to set limits to all arbitrary law-giving.

If it be true that whenever we want a person to perform a certain action, we have an instinctive impulse to impose an

ought, it may be asked why the absolute Egoist does not feel the world *ought* to serve him. For in such an instance there is no altruism to restrain him, as was assumed in the cases just cited. But we have seen that we limit our demands by our conception of possibilities, too; and so, ignorant, as we suppose him to be, of what a disinterested impulse means, he never expects anything else than that his fellow-men will try to cheat and get ahead of him, just as he is trying to do to them, and feels no more surprise or resentment towards them when they succeed than he might at a wild beast holding him in its clutches. He would accordingly as soon think of demanding mercy from the one as from the other.

It is now possible for us to justify the apparently paradoxical statement that right and wrong are always used with tacit, if not express, reference to some ulterior end, and yet may be applied to ultimate ends, or to the adoption of ends as ultimate.* Given a person filled with the love of his fellow-men, and he must not only disapprove of all attacks upon their happiness; he will demand that they cease, and the sum of all his demands will be this: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." For if I desire another to so regulate his separate actions that they will be in harmony with my ideal, so much the more will this hold of his choice of final ends, by which the former will be determined. If it be claimed that according to this view there are as many kinds of right as there are species of ideals, this is cheerfully admitted. If in accordance with the one it be true that "truth ought to be spoken," and with the other that "truth ought not to be spoken," here is no contradiction! For they are relative terms, like above and below, left and right, as when we say the sun has gone down at night, although to the inhabitants of China it is coming up. If no two persons had the same ideal, we should no longer clothe our demands in the declarative form "you ought;" we should confine ourselves to the imperative instead. As a matter of fact, however, we find we may assume the wide-spread existence of

* See Sidgwick's "Methods of Ethics," p. 63, (4th ed.)

certain emotions in greater or less intensity, and where they are absent we simply exclude the person from the class of moral beings. With the exception of such isolated cases, we know certain demands are sure to awaken an echo, be it faint or strong, in every human breast. In other words, on account of the practical uniformity of human nature, there is a practical uniformity of demands, and therefore in the use of the terms "ought" and "ought not;" so that we really apply them with a precision which could only be equalled by such an expression as "The sun is going down," in case there were no antipodes.

If all this be true, however, a man without the trace of a disinterested impulse could never say *to himself*, "I ought to love my neighbor," any more than he could pull himself up by his boot-straps. Where apparently through-and-through selfish men actually do this, it is due to the fact that they feel, at least in quiet hours, when self has withdrawn a little for the time, the impulse of altruism or the charm of a beautiful character, to the attainment of which unselfishness is a necessary condition; one or both being combined perhaps with the consciousness of the pressure of the will of another or others upon them. And, although the absolute Egoist is doubtless a mythical creature, I think we may convince ourselves of the essential truth of this position by the results of a single attempt to awaken moral ideas in one who approaches anywhere nearly this type. When you can find nothing either in heaven or on earth that he cares about, you will talk to him of obligation in vain.

The part played by the pressure of a foreign will in the phenomena of moral obligation explains the intimate relation between "you ought" and "you must." In the former case we assume the existence in you of an at least latent desire corresponding to our own, which the pressure of our will may awaken. I take it for granted that my ideal will find at any rate so much of an echo in your heart that it will command approval in the abstract, even if it be not able to rouse you to action in this particular instance. I assume, in other words, that you would like to see the action done, if it were not for

the fact that in this particular instance you must bear the pain or toil of doing it. On the other hand, when I say "you must," I presuppose no such ideal in you, but am none the less determined to have my own way. I accordingly try to work upon the natural impulse to obedience already noticed, or, this failing of its effect, appeal to the sole motive there is left, namely, to force or to the aversion from pain. The only *ought* that Paley's ears were able to hear was in reality just such a must, as is evident from the report he gave of it. "A man is said to be obliged," he tells us, "when he is urged by a violent motive resulting from the command of another,"* and, as is well known, this "violent motive" consisted in the fear of eternal torment on the one hand, and the hope of eternal happiness on the other.

It thus appears that when the element of *the good*, or of that which is capable of clothing itself in the form of an ideal, is taken out of the conception of obligation, this latter degenerates into what is nothing more than mere submission to an arbitrary imperative. For this reason it can never be the fundamental fact of the moral experience. It is true that we have a natural impulse, as already remarked, to yield to the pressure of the will of others, especially when this pressure is felt as that of the will of the omnipotent Creator and Preserver of the universe, and the workings of this tendency are often very strikingly displayed in the sphere of morality. But the unconditional surrender to mere power can never meet with the approval of a through-and-through altruist, nor is it even in harmony with the ordinary judgments of every-day life. Prometheus chained to the rocks for bringing the gift of fire to the wretched barbarous inhabitants of the earth, in defiance of the will of the "Father of gods and men," is one of the grandest productions of the human imagination. And were the Supreme Being such a one as Augustine and Calvin imagined him, we should despise the wretched slaves that licked the dust at his feet. The authority of the Deity does not lie in his infinite power, or else we will

* Moral Philosophy, Book II., chapter ii.

have to admit that "might makes right." It is only as we believe him a God and not a Devil,—that is to say, when we find in him the same ideals which appeal to us, and which we long to have control us more absolutely,—then and only then can we feel that what he wills is right, and even then the man of uncompromising morality complies because it is right rather than because it is commanded. Religion may indeed give us much that will strengthen the impulse to virtue. To it we may owe the support, due to the assurance of the sympathy of at least one other being in the universe, in all that we do. To it, the steadying influence arising from the consciousness that the eye of one is upon us who sees and notes each action great and small, and who can read the profoundest secrets of the heart as the words upon an open page. To it, above all, the joyful assurance of the final victory of the cause for which we battle. These are great and important services, but farther it cannot go. For the will of God in itself is incapable of supplying us with the foundation for the distinction between right and wrong. This must be sought in something that appeals to us as a good, and the ultimate criterion by which we measure out approbation and disapprobation can be given by nothing else than our chosen ideal.

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